

Message Text

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INFO AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM
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CINCUSNAVEUR LONDON
COMNAVTELCOM WASHDC
USCINCEUR VAIHINGEN
COMIDEASTFOR
NAVCOMMUNIT ASMARA
NAVCOMMSTA NEA MAKRI
CNO WASHDC

CONFIDENTIAL ASMARA 0673

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINS, ETRN, ET
SUBJECT: INFUSION OF FLAME DIVISION HEIGHTENS TENSIONS IN KEREN

REF: ASMARA 0586 (DTG 231310Z JUL 76)

1. SUMMARY: REPORTS RECENTLY RECEIVED BY THE CONGEN INDICATE THAT THE ARRIVAL OF SEVERAL BATTALIONS OF THE FLAME DIVISION IN KEREN HAS INCREASED TENSIONS BETWEEN THE CIVILIAN POPULATION AND THE EPMG MILITARY AUTHORITIES.

2. THREE BATTALIONS OF THE FLAME DIVISION WERE REPORTEDLY AIRLIFTED INTO KEREN DURING THE THIRD WEEK OF JULY IN ORDER TO RELIEVE THE COMMANDO POLICE GARRISON BESIEGED AT HAGAZ (SEE REFTEL). THE RELIEF OPERATION WAS COMPLETED WITH MINIMAL CASUALTIES, AND

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THE FLAME TROOPS WERE RETURNED TO KEREN TO COUNTER INSURGENT

THREATS AGAINST THAT CITY AND SURROUNDING OUTPOSTS. WHILE THE THREATENED ASSAULT HAS NOT MATERIALIZED, INSURGENT PRESSURES CONTINUE. THERE HAS BEEN NO CIVILIAN CONVOY TO KEREN FROM ASNARA SINCE MAY, 1976, AND THERE ARE INCREASING SHORTAGES OF CERTAIN FOOD ITEMS AND OF FUEL.

3. TRAVELERS ARRIVING FROM KEREN REPORT THAT THE FLAME TROOPS ARE UNNERVED BY THE GENERAL SITUATION AND FREQUENTLY FIRE AT SHADOWS AFTER CURFEW. THIS, COMBINED WITH THEIR GENERAL HARRASSMENT OF THE CIVIL POPULATION, HAS MADE THEM THOROUGHLY DISLIKED BY THE KEREN RESIDENTS. THIS SITUATION IS IN SHARP CONTRAST TO REPORTS RECEIVED EARLIER IN THE YEAR THAT KEREN WAS FREE OF MANY OF THE TENSIONS PREVAILING IN ASMARA. AT THAT TIME FOOD WAS MORE PLENTIFUL IN KEREN AND THE DUSK-TO-DAWN CURFEW WAS ONLY LAXLY OBSERVED. THERE WAS REPORTEDLY AN INFORMAL ACCOMMODATION IN EXISTENCE BETWEEN THE INSURGENTS AND THE EPMG MILITARY AND POLICE WHICH PERMITTED RELATIVELY FREE INGRESS AND EGRESS FROM KEREN. THIS SITUATION ENGENDERED A PARTICULAR RESPECT FOR THE CO OF THE ETHIOPIAN FORCES IN KEREN BECAUSE OF HIS RESTRAINT IN REACTING TO INSURGENT ACTIVITIES. WHILE THAT CO STILL RETAINS NOMINAL COMMAND, THE POPULATION IS FEARFUL THAT, SHOULD HE BE REPLACED, HIS POLICY OF RESTRAINT WOULD EVAPORATE.

4. THERE IS ONE REPORT WHICH STATES THAT INSURGENTS HAVE INFORMED KEREN RESIDENTS THAT THEY SHOULD EVACUATE THEIR WOMEN AND CHILDREN AS THE REBELS INTEND TO SERIOUSLY TRY THE METTLE OF THE FLAME DIVISION. WHILE IT IS LIKELY THAT THIS THREAT IS JUST ONE MORE IN A SERIES OF FLATULANT INSURGENT BOASTS, IT IS NOT UNREASONABLE TO BELIEVE THAT THE REBELS WOULD SORELY LIKE TO DEFLATE THE REPORTED SELF-ESTEEM OF THE FLAME TROOPS.

5. COMMENT: THE CONDUCT OF THE FLAME TROOPS IN KEREN WOULD INDICATE THAT ALTHOUGH THEY ARE PURPORTED TO BE SPECIALLY TRAINED COUNTER-INSURGENCY FORCE, THEIR ORIENTATION IS MORE TOWARD MILITARY SOLUTIONS RATHER THAN ELICITING THE COOPERATION OF THE POPULACE. IF THEIR INTERJECTION INTO A SITUATION EXACERBATES ERITREAN TENSIONS, IT IS CLEAR THAT THERE WAS ONLY MINIMAL EMPHASIS IN THEIR TRAINING ON THE "HEARTS AND MINDS" ASPECT OF COUNTER-INSURGENCY.

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